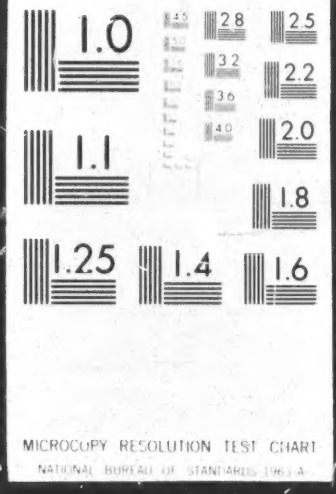
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ABSTRACT

The open house can be one of the most lively and interesting means of acquainting a community with its schools. Its unique character makes possible person-to-person contact with many individuals. Handled properly, the open house can encourage and strengthen school-community cooperation all through the year. It can increase public understanding and appreciation of education; explain the school program; increase pupil appreciation of their schools; and reveal needs, achievements, and problems. The successful open house involves careful planning, program development, publicity, and followup activities. (Author/MLF)

Open House In Your School

A Guide to Planning and Conducting an Effective School Open House

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Contents

Why Have an Open House? 5

Initial Planning 7

Developing the Program 9

Preliminaries 13

Publicity 15

Exhibits and Demonstrations 17

Bright Ideas That Work 18

Showing Gratitude Makes Staunch Friends 22

Year-Round Follow-Up 23

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Why Have an Open House?

The open house can be one of the most lively and interesting means of acquainting a community with its schools. Its unique character makes possible person-to-person contact with many individuals. Handled properly the open house can encourage and strengthen school-community cooperation all through the year. It can increase public understanding and appreciation of education; explain the school program; increase pupil appreciation of their schools; and reveal school needs, achievements, and problems.

A well-planned and well-executed open house can make the community feel that its schools are performing a valuable function and performing it well. It can give the taxpayers pride in their schools when they see that their money is being invested to create the best possible education for every child. The open house can show the citizen the latest teaching methods and tools as well as the importance of the school library, instructional materials center, language laboratories, and many other facilities about which the citizen may know little.

The open house can be far more effective than written reports in showing parents what is being done to educate their children—what the schools are teaching, why, and how. Each parent can have the opportunity to see what interests him most—what his own child is doing, what he does well, what he needs help in, and how his individual needs are being served. An open house can stimulate the parents' interest in school subjects and activities and lead to a continuing of this interest. Parental interest in schoolwork goes a long way toward encouraging success in students.

Open house gives the students a chance to display their work and accomplishments at school. Winning praise from parents and other adults can give the child a feeling that school is a worthwhile experience and can encourage him to do his best work consistently.

Open house might also be an opportunity for parents to see firsthand the buildings being used in modern teaching situations. Parents who appreciate the new architecture of schools will probably be more responsive to teacher and student needs in modern schooling. Too often parents feel that new school buildings are sheer extravagence with no educational value.

Teachers, too, have an opportunity at an open house to display and explain their professional skills and, thereby, gain respect from the community. A successful open house results in heightened community interest in the teaching profession and teaching conditions. This, in turn, leads to increased community support for smaller classes and for better facilities, equipment, and salaries.

If an open house has the potential to produce all these beneficial results, why should any school or school system hesitate to have one? For one thing some members of the faculty envision open house as one more encroachment on their time. Other teachers feel open house disrupts the orderly process of the school day and wastes valuable instruction time.

It is true that an open house is time consuming; organizing an effective open house is hard work. Nevertheless, if the faculty understands the possible benefits of an open house, chances are they will see the event as a worthwhile investment of their time and efforts. Open houses help develop the interest of students, parents, and the community in the schools. Their interest, in the long run, will lead to better education and to improved conditions for the teacher. Once the school staff agrees to devote sufficient time to organizing the event, the planning committee itself can help overcome any disruption. Careful planning and attention to details will result in a smoothly run and successful open house.

Initial Planning

Behind every successful open house, there should be a succession of carefully laid plans. An open house is not a carnival of sideshows. It is an opportunity to build lasting relationships between your particular school and the community. So, plan well in advance; give yourself time to think of all the little extras that will make your open house a success.

For the planning to be thorough, set the date for the open house well in advance. Discuss with the community why you are going to be "at home" and clarify the objectives and plans.

The entire faculty should voice their suggestions, objections, or approval of proposed plans early in the game in order to achieve the widest possible agreement on the final decision.

The objectives that appear most important will vary with the conditions in each school and community. Is the school undertaking new ways of teaching certain subjects? How would new teaching techniques be presented during an open house? Do you want the parents to see typical procedures in the school or specially prepared demonstrations and exhibits? Or do you want parents to see both? Will other groups want to take part? Will you want to include honor societies and extracurricular activities? Is there a Future Teachers of America chapter that will want to participate? Will every subject taught in the school be involved? Are there controversies (e.g., bond issues or busing) which might be better understood if parents were to see their child's school firsthand at an open house? Answers to these questions will establish the objectives of the open house.

How large is the geographical area covered by the school's enrollment? Is the open house program to be coordinated with other schools in the district or is it to function separately? Are there many working mothers in the community? Do the parents generally show a high degree of interest in the schools? Is your school a new one that might hold dedication ceremonies during the week? Is it an old school in which most parents know their way around? Answers to these questions define the types of open house programs that are feasible for a given school.

Visitors to the schools are going to be looking for certain things. Is the school in good physical condition? Are there safety hazards? Is the building kept clean? Are the rooms adequately lighted and ventilated? Are there enough well trained, enthusiastic teachers? What is the average class size? Are the textbooks well written and up-to-date? Are there instructional aids such as film and slide projectors, phonographs, tape recorders, televisions, and teaching machines? Are the science laboratories adequate? If the school is deficient in any of these areas, now is not the time for remedial action, nor should the deficiencies be hidden from the public. It may be that the open house will provide the impetus for the needed improvements in your school.

Once a decision is made on the objectives and types of events suitable to a given open house, a committee should be appointed to work out the details of the program. The chairman must be someone willing to give a large portion of his time and energy to the job. The chairman must also have the organizational and leadership qualities necessary for coordinating such an event. The committee should be large enough to handle the many phases of planning, small enough to work together effectively, and diversified enough to offer varied talents to the job. If the open house activity is to include several schools in the district, the committee for each school should coordinate its plans with those of the other schools.

Developing the Program

Although open houses are useful projects at almost any time, many schools have learned that they become more important in the eyes of parents and others if they are tied to a specific purpose. This may merely be the opening of the school year, a "show-off" open house in the spring to display student work, the opening of a brand-new school building, or the observance of some local historical event. Whatever the occasion, a carefully developed program with a purpose in mind is the key to success.

The open house committee should first decide which people are to be reached: parents, businessmen, community leaders, alumni. Smaller groups—such as clubs; church, fraternal, or service organizations; and retired teachers—should not be forgotten.

Next, decide on the form of the program. There are four general types of open house programs that may be used singly or in combination.

The first type of open house program is a general invitation to the community to visit the school during a specified time. This program requires the least amount of preparation on the part of individual teachers, since they are expected simply to carry on with regular lessons. They should, of course, be advised not to schedule tests or long segments of independent work during this time; rather, teachers should be encouraged to spend much of the week in teaching and class-participation activities. Parents are then able to observe an interesting, yet typical, pattern of the school day. Tours of the school may be included. This plan gives the greatest number of parents the opportunity to visit as they can choose the time most convenient to them.

There are, however, considerable drawbacks to this plan. First, it tends to be the most disruptive, with parents wandering in and out of classrooms all week long. Second, it is impossible for any class to continue to do its most interesting or representative work for an entire week. Third, guides and hostesses are needed for an extensive period. The most practical solution is to work out shifts

and use as many students for these jobs as possible, but this procedure rarely results in the use of the most effective and knowledgeable guides and hostesses. Finally, bear in mind that most parents work during the day, and this plan is not always feasible for those with full-time commitments during the day.

The second type of open house program is a special day or special time during one or more days set aside for open house visits. If a number of schools in a system are planning this type of event, schedules should be drawn up cooperatively to cause the least amount of conflict for parents with children at more than one school. This plan can include a luncheon or tea, a special assembly with students and/or adults participating, guided tours of the building, and classroom visits.

Within the confines of this second plan, teachers have more flexibility with their classroom program than they have in the first plan. They can show parents typical procedures, or they can explain and demonstrate new programs or methods being used in their subject or grade (e.g., modern math, a new way of teaching reading or spelling, language laboratories, and improved audio-visual aids), or they can stage exhibits or presentations by the students. In the past, some schools have invited parents to speak to the students about their special fields, and other schools have had parents teach the classes for a period to give parents a teacher's perspective of the classroom.

Some of the drawbacks to the first plan are involved in the second one also. Neither plan provides time for parent-teacher conferences, although appointments for conferences can be made for a later date. In the second plan, even fewer parents will be able to attend, since this calls for a strictly scheduled open house. This type of program requires careful planning in order to coordinate the various events involved.

The third type of open house program is a condensed school day, held one evening during the week without the students. Parents follow their child's schedule, attending each class for 10 or 15 minutes to hear the teacher explain his course. This plan, like the second, allows for an assembly consisting of a student program, a talk by the principal or a faculty member, a film, a panel discussion including members of the community, or a speech by someone outside the school or community.

One major disadvantage of this plan is that it does not provide for student participation, since the students are not in class when the parents attend. However, examples of individual work can be on display; in one school each pupil drew his face on a paper plate,

attached one of his own outfits at the bottom, and sat his "dummy" in his own seat to greet his parents in the evening. There is also a logistics problem involved in departmental schools: each student must give his parents a copy of his own schedule to follow, and guides must be strategically placed to direct parents from room to room efficiently.

The fourth type of open house program schedules a daytime period for parents to watch their children in class and an evening program for parent-teacher conferences. An assembly with a luncheon or dinner can be included. This plan enables full participation by the entire school, gives parents an opportunity to discuss their own children's work, allows those who can attend only at night or only in the day to take advantage of at least part of the program, and permits wide flexibility in types of events that can be included.

However, this plan also involves the most detailed planning. One major problem is the long lines that will inevitably form for some teachers. A partial solution is to limit parent-teacher conference time strictly to 5 or 10 minutes. Another solution is to display student work along the line's path. In this way parents waiting in line can look at something relevant to their child's school activity.

If the school chooses a specific time for the community to visit, it should nevertheless be prepared for the small number of guests who will arrive at other times. The number is generally not large enough to cause any disruption, but there should be a host or hostess to greet them, extra chairs in classrooms, and materials they could take home.

As an alternative to the open house, the school arranges living room visits in neighboring homes instead of inviting parents to visit the classrooms. In Hartford, Connecticut, (Mark Twain Elementary School) this type of "open house" was attended by twice as many parents as came to the previous, traditional open house. This particular program involved several evenings over a three-week period. Interestingly enough this idea was developed in a parent-teacher conference in which parents offered their suggestions for boosting parent involvement in open house activities.

Choose the type of open house program most suited to your school's particular situation. Decide how many days and how much time each day will be needed. In scheduling dates for the open house, take care to avoid conflict with other schools and other community events.

Most importantly when developing the open house program, remember that the parents want to meet you, the teacher. They may be too shy to initiate a conversation, but they want to meet their child's teacher and to hear how their child is doing in school. A well developed open house relaxes shy parents and encourages them to talk openly and take part in their child's school.

Preliminaries

Just as a person invites friends to enjoy the atmosphere of his home, so a school invites its parents and neighbors in for a look and a talk. This is the spirit of the popular, successful open house. And yours will be just that, providing you pay close attention to preliminary details. Here are a few tips that will get you started:

- List the many tasks and find the people to handle them.

- Make a cost estimate. The committee will have to know where it can get money and how much is available. There are several sources of revenue for open house budgets. Often the individual school sets aside money specifically for the open house. The school system may do the same, making allocations for each school. Local education associations may have a budgeted amount of money for open house activities. Many civic and lay organizations also maintain funds for activities such as an open house. To find out how much money is available, the planning committee should contact all of these groups before drawing up a final budget.

- Extend invitations to speakers and special guests from the community at large.

- Encourage participants from within the school itself. Plays, concerts, and classroom demonstrations are possible open house activities. Students and teachers should plan as far in advance as possible.

- Consider housekeeping and parking. The building and grounds should be thoroughly cleaned, and plans should be made to provide adequate parking space.

- Anticipate and provide for the usual needs of the guests. At the entrance to the school there should be students or faculty assigned to a coatroom and registration table. A nursery would enable many more parents to attend. There should also be someone at a reception desk who can answer questions that will range from where Miss Smith's room is to how the building is heated.

• Provide each guest with a map showing the location of the planned activities. Estimate attendance before deciding which areas of the school are to be used. Guides should be on hand to answer questions in a friendly and helpful manner.

• Use posters, exhibits, and publications to help tell the school's story. Each room should have a display that dramatizes its activity. Use giveaway material on the basis of its interest to the community. A fact sheet on school finances, attendance, equipment, and staff will show taxpayers how their money is being spent. A statement of the methods and aims of the school will show how, and for what, future citizens are being educated. The National Education Association publishes inexpensive leaflets that explain to parents the current issues and practices in education.

• Appoint a publicity chairman. His assignment may be to handle media publicity for the open house, to oversee the sending of invitations to parents, to compile a scrapbook of the event for future reference, and to be sure that all who assist in the open house receive thank-you letters.

tary school level, announcements can be made through direct letters to the parents or through invitations inserted in the students' report cards.

Exhibits and Demonstrations

The type of open house program will decide the complexity of exhibits and demonstrations to be included. If the teachers explain their methods and goals to the parents alone or show a typical classroom day with the students, they should be prepared to show the activities most interesting to parents and to answer questions about the courses. They should not be expected to discuss individual students; this should be left for parent-teacher conferences. If demonstrations portray an actual classroom event, the community can learn both the procedure and the worth of a given program. Rehearsal by the pupils for a demonstration lesson should be kept to a minimum so that the classroom demonstration will be a just simulation for the parent. For the open house program to be successful, it must give a true idea of what the school means to those whom it involves.

Preparation of exhibits and displays by students can be a valuable part of their education. For guidance in planning, see *Putting Education on Display*, a booklet published by the National Education Association. Displays can provide the opportunity to integrate the work of two or more subjects. For example, students might prepare a mural under the art teacher's supervision to show the various cultures they studied in history class. But again, the displays should not be so elaborate as to have deprived the students of their regular instruction time. The time spent by teacher and pupils on such projects should be justifiable in terms of their direct educational value.

Plays, concerts, and physical education demonstrations can be very effective. They are most worthwhile, however, if the necessary rehearsal time is short enough not to have interfered unduly with schoolwork.

Teachers with specialized talents should be called upon to oversee the preparation of exhibits and demonstrations for which they can be helpful advisers. Art and industrial arts teachers are likely to be in particular demand. Be careful, however, not to disrupt their regular teaching duties.

Bright Ideas That Work

Remember, the ideal open house program is not a brief flurry of publicity and a hasty look into the schools. Instead it is the high spot in a year-round "open door policy" which helps parents and other citizens understand school needs and achievements. Half of the work in building such solid understanding is catching the public's ear. Once this is accomplished, it's up to you, the teacher, to make the experience a warm and meaningful one.

Here are some inducements that work:

- Try organizing a car pool for your open house night. Or make a real thing out of it and send the school bus around on its regular run to pick up parents instead of children!

- Send a "Did You Know?" letter full of fascinating facts about a child. For instance: "Did you know . . . that your daughter Margaret has a real flair for art? . . . that she had the second-best mark in last week's spelling test? . . . that she is preparing a very special gift for you? Do you want to know more fascinating facts about Margaret? Visit her classroom during our open house."

- Excuse high school students from attending daytime open house classes if they provide a parent or adult to take their place in the classroom. This is a proven way to encourage older, less enthusiastic students to invite their parents to open house.

- Give the parents a chance to talk back. When you invite them to your open house, include a reply card on which they can write questions that they want discussed as part of the program.

- Include nonparents. They usually make up a majority of the community's population and often control school policy decisions. As part of your publicity campaign, aim special invitations to them through store posters; radio, television, and newspaper announcements; and perhaps even leaflets left at doors.

- Attract the attention of businessmen by staging a special business-education day during the program — including "breakfast and briefing" followed by a tour of the school.

• Plan a "Parents' Exhibit." Show things parents have brought in and want to display. Each item should bear the name of parent and child.

• Urge parents to bring a neighbor whose child will soon be starting school. The "new" parent will enjoy this friendly way of getting acquainted with his child's future school and future teachers.

• Set aside time for staff members and fathers only. Frequently when both parents are invited to open house functions, only the mother attends. If, however, an invitation is addressed just to the father, the father will be more likely to attend because no one can go in his place. Mothers are frequently better acquainted with their child's school than are fathers—even though mothers often have full-time jobs. It is important that fathers also attend open house activities.

Here are some ways teachers can set the stage:

• Line up in advance something nice to say about each child in your classroom. Parents are interested in the school—but above all, they want to hear about Sally or Willie.

• Move around—say a word or two to every parent who comes to the open house. Don't concentrate on those people you happen to know.

• Tape-record a "welcome sentence" from each child to his parents. After mothers and dads hear this, they in turn record a message to their child which is played in class next morning.

• Have pupils make name cards for visitors. Cards could be shaped like slates, little red schoolhouses, or school bells. Or try a card with the parent's name and his child's picture (as drawn by the child). Children might label desks with large signs bearing their names and perhaps a self-portrait.

• Fasten "mailboxes" to the back of each desk with the name of the child on top. Ask parents and friends of each child to leave notes in the mailbox for the child to find the next day.

• Send guest cards to grandparents. This is sure to gain results. Students can greet them, escort them to the classroom, and invite them to enjoy a snack in the school cafeteria.

• Make friends with that "first-time" parent—the one who's never visited your classroom before. Show that you are interested in his or her child.

Schools throughout the country have developed ideas to present their story with vividness and impact. Some may be suitable for repetition in your school; others may lead you to some bright ideas of your own. The following is a sampling of the hundreds of imaginative and fruitful activities that have been either reported to the National Education Association or published in the National School Public Relations Association newsletter, *It Starts in the Classroom:*

- Missoula, Montana. Ten questions were printed in the open house program to start parents thinking about education. The answers were printed on 4' by 8' posters hung throughout the school.

- Riverdale, Maryland. Third grade pupils planned and paid for (at a cost of 10 cents each) color movies of their activities. The project provided not only a very interesting program for the open house but also a worthwhile learning experience for the children.

- Washington, Ohio. Radio students demonstrated their skills by taping interviews with parents.

- Chicago, Illinois. Wells High School chemistry students demonstrated the uses of chemistry outside the school. The result was that student interest in taking the course increased and that parent understanding of the course improved. It was a brief, educational experience in chemistry for everyone.

- Kennewick, Washington. Intermediate students left letters on their desks to tell their parents what to look for among the displays. Many parents left replies for their children to find the next morning.

- Concord, California. The Gregory Gardens School held an open house stressing teaching methods and curriculum coordination. Sixth grade pupils presented a skit on the parts of speech, and tapes of reading classes were played to illustrate teaching methods. Displays featured school finance and audiovisual materials.

- Chattanooga, Tennessee. All schools in the district sent displays to one large exhibit to show the community how the schools are meeting the problems of the Space Age. The exhibit was opened by the mayor. More than a hundred displays were set up in a large field house; they covered science, language arts, mathematics, physical education, art, social studies, and vocational education. Some schools used filmstrips or color slides to supple-

ment the exhibits. Some displays showed students participating in learning demonstrations. A different school band furnished music each day.

- Parkrose, Oregon. Schools brought the open house directly to the community. Each day a class met in a store window, allowing the community to watch classroom procedures. Teachers used the opportunity to combine the program with field trips to downtown businesses and institutions.

- Palestine, Texas. The PTA's sponsored the open houses in this district. The high school featured a choral concert, and the local radio station broadcast recordings of the band and chorus to publicize the event.

- New York, New York. A pilot school in the team teaching experiment invited parents to observe team teaching in art, science, and social studies. In a Bronx elementary school each of four grades prepared a special assembly for a different day of the week. One grade dramatized the stories of Hans Christian Andersen; another emphasized the importance of reading; still another produced an original play on what pupils miss when they are absent from school; the remaining grade stressed the importance of parents' joining the local parent-teacher association.

- Klamath Falls, Oregon. The open house demonstrated activities in many subjects: warm-up exercises in physical education, laboratory experiments in science (to illustrate that seeing is believing), word study relating to an exciting topic (to build interest in learning to read), language laboratory techniques, use of the library, and models of homes from around the world made in a social studies class.

- Oakland, California. Pupils based their open house on the dramatic changes that have taken place in education in recent years. As examples of innovations elementary school parents saw science and foreign language demonstrations as well as instructional television.

- Superior, Wisconsin. Students conducted a panel discussion on "Our Problems as Grade School Children" at a PTA meeting. At another school a fathers' night was held to ensure that more fathers visited the school. An elementary school showed parents how a child learns to read by using a dummy alphabet.

- Numerous schools throughout the country have based their open houses on the cornerstone laying or dedication of a new building.

Showing Gratitude Makes Staunch Friends

"Thank you" is a most welcome phrase to hear and will make many friends for your school. An open house program is just the right opportunity for saying it. Here is how some schools do it:

- The staff of a brand-new school hung a placard across the front of the building. The message was "Thank you for our school." If you're lucky enough to be opening a new building, try this gracious gesture during open house.
- Teachers in one school turned the tables with a "thank-you luncheon" for parents and other local citizens who had helped their schools in ways "over and above the call of duty."
- Letters to all who have helped make an open house observance a success are warmly received. Don't forget those cooperative newspaper editors, radio reporters, and TV station managers when you write your notes. Some schools let students write the letters. It's a fine class project for the younger grades: their letters are refreshing and very readable.

Year-Round Follow-Up

The interest an open house generates in your school is a tremendous resource that can last throughout the year. Parents and community are likely to take a more active concern in the welfare of your school if you catch their interest during an open house. Once you've caught their interest, don't lose it. Follow-up activities such as parent conferences, panel discussions, and advisory committees are an effective way to develop school-community contacts made at open house.

The successful open house involves careful planning, program development, publicity, and follow-up activities. The benefits of encouraging year-round community support for better schools are well worth the work involved. Good luck with your open house.